



Highlights of [GAO-06-967](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2002, the Biscuit Fire burned almost 500,000 acres of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest in southwestern Oregon. In its wake, the Biscuit Fire Recovery Project (Project) is one of the largest, most complex postfire recovery projects undertaken by the Forest Service. Considerable controversy exists over the Project and its salvage sales to harvest dead trees.

GAO was asked to determine (1) how the Project compares with the Forest Service's general approach to postfire recovery, (2) the status of the Project's salvage sales and how the reported financial and economic results of the sales compare with initial estimates, (3) the status of other Project activities, and (4) the extent of reported improper logging and the agency's response. To answer these objectives, GAO reviewed Project environmental analysis documents, plans, and activity reports and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

Given the size and unique nature of this fire and continuing public interest, GAO recommends that the Chief of the Forest Service direct the Pacific Northwest Regional Forester and the Rogue River-Siskiyou Forest Supervisor to report annually on the Project's status until substantially complete. In comments, the Forest Service agreed with the report findings but asked for a time limit for the recommended annual report. GAO modified its recommendation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-967.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3184 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

BISCUIT FIRE RECOVERY PROJECT

Analysis of Project Development, Salvage Sales, and Other Activities

What GAO Found

The Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest staff followed the Forest Service's general approach to postfire recovery in developing the Biscuit Fire Recovery Project, but several unique circumstances affected the time taken and the alternatives it included. For example, the size of the burned area—and, subsequently, the size of the Project—complicated the environmental analysis and increased the time needed to complete and review it. Also, the regulations and guidance governing timber harvest and road building in the forest's inventoried roadless areas changed several times, in part due to litigation, affecting the amount of timber available for harvest.

As of December 2005, the forest staff had nearly completed 12 salvage sales; however, incomplete sales and a lack of comparable economic data, among other things, make comparing the financial and economic results with the agency's initial estimates difficult. For fiscal years 2003 through 2005, the Forest Service and other agencies spent about \$5 million on the sales and related activities. In the next several years, the Forest Service also plans to spend an additional \$5.7 million to remove brush and reforest the sale areas. In return, the agency collected about \$8.8 million from the sales. While the agency estimated that the salvage sales would generate about \$19.6 million for restoration, 6,900 local jobs, and \$240 million in regional economic activity, it is premature to compare these estimates with the results because the sales are not complete. The Forest Service will generate additional expenditures, revenues, and economic activity from two sales sold in the summer of 2006. Even when complete sales' results are available, however, a comparison will be complicated by a lack of comparable financial and economic data.

Through December 2005, the forest staff began work on most of the other activities identified in the Project but completing them depends on the amount of salvage harvest, funding sources, and work schedules. For example, the amount of brush disposal work—estimated at 18,939 acres—will be reduced because the acres of salvage harvest have been reduced. Other activities, such as establishing fuel management zones to help fight future fires, depend on the Forest Service funding and scheduling the work over many years. In addition, a large-scale study and monitoring activities are still being planned and yet unfunded. Although the forest staff identified the importance of making Project results available to the public, they do not separately report on Project activities and results from other programs.

During salvage harvest operations in 2004 and 2005, the Forest Service reported three incidents of improper logging and took action to prevent such occurrences in the future. Two of the incidents were caused by Forest Service errors in marking its boundaries. Forest staff have since developed procedures to better mark boundaries of sale areas. A third incident was caused by an error on the part of the company that purchased the sale; the company was fined \$24,000, and the trees were left on the ground.